

Sacred Music and Composition: A Journey of Self-Expression and Self-Discovery

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Crow', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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Abstract

The purpose of this honors thesis creative project was two-fold – 1) to synthesize my formal music education and my self-taught compositional skills in an authentic performance, and 2) to develop my compositional philosophy and style as part of my pursuit of musical excellence. To accomplish this, I composed a choral work, rehearsed it with the Ball State Concert Choir, and conducted the premiere during a choir concert on October 26, 2013. The whole process gave me a richer insight into why music is such an integral part of my life and my faith, and helped me discover how I will approach music in the future.

Acknowledgements

Many sincere thanks go to Dr. Andrew Crow, my honors thesis advisor – for granting me the rehearsal time and the opportunity to work with Concert Choir on my composition, for the extra time coaching me on conducting and rehearsal preparation, for being patient with me as I completed this daunting project, and for teaching me to “risk spectacular failure” in everything I do.

Special thanks go to the Concert Choir for making my composition sound better than I ever imagined.

Thank you to my parents, who have always been my biggest fans and most avid supporters of all musical endeavors.

Many thanks also to all my friends and colleagues who supported me and offered advice and encouragement during this project.

I offer this thesis and the work that went into it as a prayer of praise and thanks to God, who gave me my talents and who sustains me – through whom and for whom I do all things.

Sacred Music and Composition: A Journey of Self-Expression and Self-Discovery

From a young age, I knew I wanted to become a professional musician, to share my musical talents with others, and to make a significant contribution to my society through music. This brought me to where I am now – about to complete a bachelor's degree in music education from Ball State University, and eager to share my love of music with the world in whatever way I can. Part of my university training prepared me to defend the significance of music in schools through well-informed advocacy efforts. This exercise helped me to consider the importance of music and its role in my life. I inherently know that music is a treasure to the world, and that music reminds me that I have a heart and a soul by the way it touches them. But, I want to be able to explain exactly *why* this is so, and the significance thereof. If I am going to be a serious performer, teacher, and composer, I must define my philosophy of music and develop a concrete understanding of its significance. For example, I already know that music is the way I best connect with God, and that performing sacred music resonates so well with me because I believe in my heart the truth of the words I sing. For me, sacred music is so prayerful, powerful, and transcendent because its entire purpose is to convey and celebrate the glory of God. I want to deeply understand *all* music the way I understand sacred music – the reason it is a pillar of truth and importance in my life. This understanding is in some ways difficult to articulate, but I feel obligated as a serious musician to explore and define it – to pursue true self-expression and self-discovery.

So far as a composer, I have been limited by the fact that I compose almost strictly by inspiration, and not by careful deliberation or compositional choices. Natural talent is fine to start, but true masters of their crafts refine their natural talent to reach full potential. I wanted to refine my compositional process by carefully considering every musical choice. As an exercise, and for my honors thesis creative project artifact, I challenged myself to compose a brand new composition without any previous ideas or inspiration, and to document the process. Since I was not required to do any composing like this for my degree, this project was a very beneficial supplement to my music education, as well as a way to augment my overall musicianship. Composing is creating, the highest cognitive process on the revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy, and it is the way I can share my thoughts and feelings with others.

When I set out to write "Set Me as a Seal," I felt entirely inadequate even though I had written plenty of music before. Normally, I am fueled almost entirely by random inspiration for my most successful and pleasing compositions. This time, however, was different – I had commissioned myself, with no guidelines and no existing ideas, to write a new composition. I soon learned that composing is much easier within specified guidelines, for I was at a loss of how to start for quite some time.

First, which theme for my composition would suffice – nature, love, loss, friendship, or a story? Should it be sacred or secular? I struggled with just selecting a theme for a few months. Even the most sonorous harmonies can hardly make up for a poor choice of subject matter, a fundamental element of the character of the composition. Not to mention, at this early stage in my career, every composition is one more testament to my style and ability, so I put myself under pressure to take pride in every bit of output. Eventually

deciding to compose a sacred piece of music stemmed from my belief that music is a gift from God, and that my gift of music can serve no greater purpose than to praise Him.

I tried to compose an original text, but despite my enthusiasm for writing lyrics, this proved most difficult, and the result was, at best, contrived. Instead, I turned to the Bible to find a text for my composition. In my perusal of scripture, I came across the following text from Song of Songs: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm. For love is strong as death, longing is as fierce as Sheol. Its arrows are arrows of fire, flames of the divine. Deep waters cannot quench love, nor rivers sweep it away. Were one to offer all the wealth of his house for love, he would be utterly despised.”¹ The verses are passionate, hopeful, honest, uplifting, powerful, romantic, and packed with opportunities for word painting. They speak of two relationships – the love of God for his people, and marital love. The first is profoundly spiritual; the second is more accessible in the secular realm, if desired. Only one thing concerned me – the fact that I was able to find a couple well-known choral settings of these verses already in existence. Rather than let that dissuade me from using the text, I took it as a challenge to compose a new, beloved arrangement for future generations to enjoy, and I decided to use the entire text verbatim rather than shortening it as the other composers had done. At last, my theme and text were chosen, and I could finally begin composing some music.

I have several compositional techniques that I use. Sometimes my method is as simple as singing or humming to pass the time, or even waking up from sleep with a tune in my head. I will then record it on my phone and notate it later. My favorite technique, though, the one that I find most satisfying, is what I like to call “sound doodling” on the

¹ Song of Songs 8:6-7 New American Bible

piano or with my voice. A hidden blessing in my mediocre piano skills is that my mistakes reveal new and beautiful harmonic possibilities. This, combined with vocal improvisation, is largely how “Set Me as a Seal” was born. I made some significant changes along the way; the composition was originally conceived with piano and cello, but the pressure of deadlines and the difficulty of writing a competent musical part for an instrument in which I am not proficient necessitated that the composition be simplified. When I eliminated the instruments and closed the gaps intended for interludes, I was pleasantly surprised to find that what I had written so far sounded complete as *a cappella*. The composition also was originally intended for women’s chorus, but for scheduling purposes and a bit of a personal challenge to tackle a 4-part chorus of men and women, I altered the voicing. I always intended for this honors thesis composition to be for chorus, though, because choir is my favorite medium of music, and the ensemble with which I am most familiar.

Key elements of any typical piece of choral literature are text, form, melody, harmony, and expression. “Set Me as a Seal” is formed in three main sections that resemble each other at the beginning, but develop their own distinct variation. The first section, mm. 1-20, is packed with a passionate beckoning for loyal unity of souls, with the strength of death and the fierce passion of a longing heart. There is no discernible melody in the first seven measures – rather, a blend of sound sets up a canvas on which a melody will soon emerge. From the first unison note, the music yearns for unity, perhaps like Christ yearns for the unity of his Church. The tonality keeps true to the key signature of D-flat major throughout, colored by a digression to the parallel minor mode just in the first section to further illustrate longing and passion. The male singers articulate the text “arrows of fire” and send it flying like warriors, and the women join in like a throng of

angels on fire with adoration for the Lord. A pause for reverberation in the concert hall is marked with an empty measure and a fermata, also indicating a shift to the next section.

Like the beginning, but with different text, the voices start in unison, but the altos and basses descend as if into the deep waters that cannot quench love. The end of this section, with mm. 37-39, drives home the severity of offenses against love with accented long notes followed by unexpected short ones. A caesura (pause) and fermata on the word “so” set up the third and final composition, which returns to the first lines of text. This textual reprise returns the tone from harsh and unforgiving back to romantic and loyal for an uplifting resolution. The layered texture, changing harmony, and sweeping motion in the voices in the last section (“Deep waters...”) illustrates water trying to no avail to “quench love” and “sweep it away.” All of these analytical observations were conscious choices I made during the compositional process. This was my goal – to think more deeply about what I was writing, and reflect the text accurately with the music. Overall, I am quite pleased with the final product. “Set Me as a Seal” is much different than I had originally planned, but even despite my harsh self-criticism, I enjoy listening to it.

I learned several important lessons about the compositional process from this exercise. I learned that I function much more efficiently with deadlines for the creative process. I learned to balance a melody more evenly throughout the different voices, as well as how to think about the way different vowels will sound in different voice types at different ranges and dynamics. I also was careful to accurately represent the natural syllabic stress through my composition because I find that this is both easier to sing as a performer and easier to comprehend as an audience. Additionally, seeing the original product of my mind on paper helps me see my limitations and innovations, such as how

many expressionistic devices I employ, or how much rhythmic and tonal variation I use in my compositions. Analyzing one's own music is, in ways, so much more challenging than analyzing someone else's music because one has to actually clear the mind of any preconceived ideas, and view the music from an outside perspective. These are all very important realizations for me as a composer that will bring significant growth over time. I also have pondered new ways to employ these learned lessons in my approach to future composition projects. The following techniques may be useful: controlled dissonance, close harmonies, tone clusters, polyphony, and staggered text entrances for texture. For my next major composition, I would also like to try assigning melodic motifs to key words in my text and building a melody and cohesive musical work from there, instead of just conceiving a melody via random inspiration. I would like to see how much even more planning and forethought I can put into my composing, and how this effects the final product.

When my composition was complete, I began the process of preparing to teach it. I met with my advisor to determine a rehearsal schedule, determining that I had a total of two hours of rehearsal time to divide up among several class periods. I visited Concert Choir on several occasions to rehearse the music, and we began learning it by sight reading slowly and working on particularly tricky sections. As the composer, I was, of course, very familiar with all of it, so it was hard for me to anticipate where these trouble spots would be. For instance, the suspension sequence in mm. 12-14 dragged, and on the whole, the tempo was difficult to keep moving. The men's three-part harmony in mm. 16-18 proved difficult to tune, and it was of course a bit of a challenge to sing in tune without any instrumental accompaniment. Overall, though, I was able to tackle these difficult aspects by creating lesson plans for each session and giving adequate attention to all sections of my

composition. After each session, I met with my advisor to discuss what kind of things I heard, and what to focus on for next time.

A significant aspect of this musical endeavor was learning to conduct my composition. As a music education major, I have taken three courses in conducting. I was happy to have made major progress on my conducting gesture, being that it does not come naturally for me. Some of my goals for conducting were to use more of a horizontal plane (rather than a lot of up and down movement), maintain a lyrical, moving tempo, show expressive details through varied gestures, and set up the beginnings and endings of phrases with delicate precision. In order to meet these goals and improve my overall conducting skills, I analyzed the musical score, practiced in a mirror and on my friends, and practiced dancing freely to discover what sort of motions were natural. I learned that it takes a long time to become comfortable conducting even my own works, but once I do, it is much easier to just focus on making music, rather than worrying about technical details like conducting gesture. Also, being a conductor for a high-level group like the Concert Choir is less about leading the singers and more like meeting them halfway. Indeed, the conductor is the facilitator of a shared musical conversation. I felt on various occasions that I was connecting on a very deep level with my colleagues in the choir, even though we were not speaking in typical conversation.

Through this experience, I have gained several valuable tools and strategies to prepare for future conducting experiences, whether for my own music or not. It really helps me to have a perfect idea of what the music should sound like, so I can adequately fix, shape, and move the music. I also would like to spend even more time trying to find a more natural, dance-like gesture, and to make sure I can consistently keep a steady conducting

plane and a wide, expressive range of conducting. Also, I can always improve my facial expression while I conduct because I tend to focus very intently. I also struggle with feeling awkward at times because of my 5'3", less-than-commanding stature. However, I received a very meaningful compliment from a colleague I admire, also a woman of small stature, who reassured me that even small women can be commanding conductors. A commanding presence and continued gestural refinement are my main goals for my conducting endeavors.

During the rehearsal process and the eventual performance, I was overjoyed to find that several of my peers from the ensemble absolutely loved it – and for many, it was their favorite song on the fall concert. The performance itself was just exhilarating – it peaked at just the right moment, and I thought it was the best performance of the song the choir had sung. Many audience members, young and old, complimented me generously, and expressed that they felt that same “conversation” I was having with the choir. The goal is for the audience, conductor, and choir to all be in communion with each other during musical performances, so this was very gratifying to hear. I was so honored to have had the chance to conduct a university-level choir, and even though I was nervous, it was very gratifying to collaborate with my friends to bring my composition to life.

The process of composing and conducting a musical work was beneficial to my growth as a music educator and musician. I was able to consciously make compositional and conducting choices to communicate my thoughts and feelings. Even more important, it helped me think about why I love music and composing. In particular, it helped me define my philosophy of music so I can be a truly serious musician.

Virtually every person I have ever met loves music, whether or not they do it for a living. What, then, exactly is it about music that I love enough to pursue it as a profession? To answer that, I first have to answer a broader question: What *is* music? There are many different genres of music – classical, jazz, pop, hip hop, electronic, acoustic, choral, instrumental, opera, musical theatre, etc. Modern extensions of music composition have critics questioning the boundaries of what is “music” and what is “noise.” I myself have struggled with the question of “what is music?” Some hear music as rhythm, with harmony in background. For me, beautiful harmonies and chord progressions take the forefront. Perhaps those who particularly hear music in nature are more in tune with the timbre (tone, sound) of music. The line between noise and music is sometimes blurred, and when we hear something we don’t like at all, we are tempted to dismiss it as just being noise. While one might find a pipe organ to sound glorious, another might find it grating. While one might find slower music to be peaceful, another might find it boring. Clearly, there are many ways to interpret this broad art form. So, what exactly *is* music, at its core?

Music is a bridge to something greater than us. It is communal in nature, as it is an art form that all people can understand and that all societies have practiced. As a conductor and/or ensemble, it is a conversation, a sharing of intangible, indescribable feelings. As a listener, when I have an emotional response, I am part of the performance in that moment – even though I am not performing. For many, music is a treasure of such intrinsic value that it helps us transcend this worldly realm into a spiritual realm beyond our senses – only perceivable by the perfect euphoria we get when music truly touches our soul. I believe that while music is a product of human intellect and aesthetic sensitivity, it is ultimately a gift from God that gives us a glimpse of the pure heavenly. Music is a

physiological phenomenon; it is nothing short of incredible that the organs in our ears are so finely tuned that they can receive and transmit the range of vibrations in the air that translate to music in our brains. Music can take on different roles; it can tell a story, evoke memories (both good and bad), and heal us by expressing that which is beyond words, or sometimes its purpose is to simply make us feel something. It is inherently beautiful, and should be aesthetically pleasing.

Does sound require human intervention to be categorized as “music?” Like the quandary about the sound of a tree falling in the woods, would music be music if humans weren’t there to hear it? Or, would music be music if humans weren’t the ones creating it? If so, that would mean that pleasing sounds found in nature could be classified as music. The main human contribution to music is organization – as in, of pitches, rhythms, timing, sounds, and ideas. I have changed my formerly held opinion and have determined that music does not need human intervention to be music. The sounds of nature could be God’s form of music, just as a sunset is his canvas. Humans have just used the God-given gifts of intellect and aesthetic sensitivity to *refine* music and use it for their own purposes, as a creature made in God’s image might be expected to do. This explains why there are so many forms of music that are pleasing to different people; we have taken the gift and helped it evolve, but it still exists in its purest form in nature.

I chose a sacred text for my honors thesis composition, and while I did not expect the choir members to all agree with the religious message or tradition, I did expect them to connect to the text in some personal way. However, Christian texts do hold particular significance to me. Not all music’s purpose, from a human’s perspective, is to glorify God. However, the purpose of sacred music really *is* to glorify God. It is an offering. When we

bring forward the gifts to be consecrated during the Mass, we are offering back the gifts God has given to us. God has given mankind the ability to refine music, so our greatest offering is to create music that glorifies the divine composer. For, ultimately, the entire universe can be considered a divine composition. From the wind whistling through the trees in a forest, to the song of whales in the oceanic concert hall, to the silent solemnity of the galaxies, to the heartbeat of an unborn child, to the first song of a bird in early spring, to the rumbling and clashing of thunder and lightning, there is a constant symphony all around us. To me, as a Catholic, this song of the universe seems to cry out in praise to its creator. Truly, “the heavens are telling the glory of God, and their expanse is declaring the work of his hands.”² Humans, combining the gifts of intellect and aesthetic sensitivity, can cooperate with God to create music that joins in the chorus. This is the ultimate reason I partake in music; as part of this glorious creation, it is my happy obligation to offer back my talents to the God who bestowed them upon me.

Sacred music, among all genres, resonates to my core, and this project helped me realize why. First of all, it is a marriage of the two most important things in my life – God and music. What I truly want for my life, at the purest level, is to have a deep relationship with God, to discover His will for my life, and to do it with a joyful heart. Sacred music is the embodiment of exactly that. Composers write sacred music for the purpose of bringing people closer to God through worship, and to glorify Him. It comes full circle for me: sacred music, literally, *is* what I hope to do with my life. This is my vocation; this is my purpose.

² Psalm 19:1, New American Standard Bible

The process of completing this honors thesis creative project has taught me much about my compositional philosophy, musical skill, and my Catholic faith more than I ever anticipated it would. It enabled me to immerse myself in an authentic performing endeavor that combined my formal training in music education and my raw compositional abilities, refining my self-expression and furthering my self-discovery. Over the past three years since my Catholic conversion, I have become so enamored with sacred music that I will be pursuing a Masters degree in Sacred Music at the University of Notre Dame starting in Fall 2014. This graduate work will be the beginning of a lifelong pursuit of combining my two loves – my Catholic faith and music. My creative project has prepared me for the kind of strong musical philosophy I will need in the future as a sacred music composer, and I look forward very much to furthering my study of theology and music at the graduate level.

Set Me As A Seal

Song of Songs 8:6-7

Jessica M. Bush
(1991-)

Lyrical and Moving

Soprano *mp*
Set me as a seal up - on your heart, _____ as a seal up - on your

Alto *mp*
Set me as a seal up - on your heart, _____ as a seal up - on your

Tenor *mp*
Set me as a seal up - on your heart, _____ as a seal up - on your

Bass *mp*
Set me as a seal up - on your heart, _____ as a seal up - on your

7
S
arm. _____ For love is strong as death, for love is strong as death, long -

A
arm. _____ Strong as death, , strong as death,

T
arm. _____ Strong as death, strong as death,

B
arm. _____ Strong as death, strong as death,

13
S
- - - ing is as fierce as She-ol. _____ *p*

A
long - - - ing is as fierce as She-ol. _____ *p*

T
long - ing fierce as She-ol. _____ *p* Its ar-rows _____ are ar-rows of *mf*

B
fierce as She-ol. _____ *p* Its ar-rows _____ are ar-rows of *mf*

18

S *mf* *ff* *mp*

A *mf* *ff* *mp*

T *ff* *mp*

B *ff* *mp*

flames of the div - ine. Deep wa - ters can - not

flames of the div - ine. Deep wa - ters can - not

fire, Ah Deep wa - ters can - not

fire, Ah Deep wa - ters can - not

24

S

A

T

B

quench love, nor riv - ers sweep it a - way.

quench love, nor riv - ers sweep it a - way.

quench love, nor riv - ers sweep it a - way. Were one to

quench love, nor riv - ers sweep a - way. Were one to

30

S *f*

A *f*

T *f*

B *f*

oo for love,

oo for love,

of - fer all the wealth of his house love,

of - fer all the wealth of his house love;

Tenderly

37

S he would be ut-ter-ly des - pised. So, set me as a seal up - on your

A he would be ut-ter-ly des - pised. So, set me as a seal up - on your

T he would be ut-ter-ly des - pised. So, set me as a seal up - on your

B he would be ut-ter-ly des - pised. So, set me as a seal up - on your

43

S heart, as a seal up - on your arm, for love is strong as death!

A heart, as a seal up - on your arm, for love is strong as death!

T heart, as a seal up - on your arm, for love is strong as death!

B heart, as a seal up - on your arm, for love is strong as death!

50

S Deep wa - - - ters can not quench love, nor riv - ers

A Deep wa - - - ters can - not quench love, nor riv - ers

T Deep wa - - - ters can - not quench love, nor riv - ers

B Wa - - - ters can - not quench love, nor riv - ers

55

S sweep it a - way, so set me as a seal up - on

A sweep it a - way, so set me as a seal up - on

T sweep it a - way, so set me as a seal up - on

B sweep it a way, so set me as a seal up - on

62

S *subito p* — your heart, up - on your heart. *rit.* Up - on your heart.

A *subito p* — your heart, up - on your heart. *rit.*

T *subito p* — your heart, up - on your heart. *rit.*

B *subito p* — your heart, up - on your heart. *rit.* (σ) (σ)